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Assignment: Washington

U.S. press prints Red propaganda

By Ralph deToledano

DAY AFTER DAY, the American press devotes columns to the vast propaganda output of the Soviet Union and the captive nations.

This is printed as "news," and the facts, as our experts know them, seldom catch up. Simultaneously, sensational statements by ax-to-grind Americans are given Page One treatment. The net effect has been to proliferate ignorance and misinformation, to the detriment of a sound public opinion.

Repeatedly, I am asked why this is so. Why are the passionately wrong assertions by physicist Linus Pauling on the genetic effect of radioactivity given so much attention — whereas the scientific facts as known by the top men in genetics are ignored or buried?

Why are Soviet utterances on their nuclear bombs translated into scare headlines, but no equal play given to what any expert knows: (1) that though the Soviets have exploded nuclear devices, we still do not know what kind of bomb, if any, they actually have, and (2) that a 50-megaton bomb is militarily useless, if only because they have no vehicles in which to deliver it?

JUST THIS WEEK a Library of Congress research specialist testified that the United States was overestimating Soviet influence, and that Central Intelligence Agency Chief Allen Dulles had been misled by apples and oranges in order to come up with totally false figures.

(In 1958 Mr. Dulles had said that the Russians were outproducing us four-to-one in machine tools)

That the research man noted was relegated to page ten of Washington's leading newspaper. But that it should have taken until now to get the story into print is sufficient indictment.

The statistics were long known to experts on the Soviet economy — both in and out of government — but the press wasn't interested. The press has been willing to report that the Soviets were flooding our Latin American markets with machine tools, but it has never followed this up with further reports that though the Reds are selling below cost, they are having increasing difficulties in finding customers, simply because their tools are of shoddy quality and poor design.

THIS INABILITY to give balance to the news has led to some strong attacks by people who see the results and then ascribe sinister motives to the nation's correspondents.

It is, of course, nonsense to say that any substantial part of the press corps is pro-Communist.

The answer is far more complex. To begin with, most writers on national and international affairs come up from the ranks of police reporters. They think of news in terms of the sensational, and since the Soviet propaganda machine panders to that sort of conditioning, it gets the big story whenever it wants it.

The second cause of this imbalance is the lack of a balance. The press is not interested in the facts of the matter, but in the sensational.

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IF THE SOVIETS make a preposterous statement, the "man writing the story" must remember that the Communists have said and done in the past. As a rule, he didn't know in the first place, and the appropriate government agencies never trouble to supply him with the past.

There is a tendency also to think of every story as a separate unit, with no relation to what has come before. As a result, the Soviets can afford to lie and be caught at it. The next lie will go unchallenged.

The third factor is psychological. The press today is a product of its education. At one of Washington's leading universities, students are being taught that the American system is "outdated" and on its way out.

Deprived of faith in what we have built in this country, these students will become easy victims to Soviet propaganda, whose main emphasis is that Communism represents the "wave of the future," that its victory is "inevitable" because "history" is on its side.

BUT THE BASIC cause of our unconsciously slanted news is a kind of intellectual laziness. It is so much easier to accept the handout and treat it as truth than to be narrowing in many files or to interview the experts.

During the 1960 election, the

"missile gap" was standard oratorical equipment. How many reporters sought out the facts available at the Pentagon? The "gap" remained an article of faith until the newly appointed Defense Secretary Robert McNamara denied that it existed.

Since then, there has been almost no mention of it. Were the Democrats right before the election or are they right today? This is a question that bores most reporters. Mr. McNamara gave them an answer — and that was that.

There is much talk at meetings of editors and publishers about the public's right to know. But the sad fact is that censorship is no longer needed. The old bird-dogging reporter is almost non-existent. The "inside story" is no longer the result of journalistic enterprise. It is usually planted by a disgruntled official or fed to a favored few to dramatize an Administration position. That this was as true under the Eisenhower Administration as it is under President Kennedy's makes it none the less sad.

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